

READING *THE REVELATIONS OF ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY* AS A DEVOTIONAL TEXT

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, DC
April 28, 2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Sarah McNamer for her time, support, and guidance during this project and for introducing me to Elizabeth. I would also like to thank Kelley Wickham-Crowley for her help and insightful questions.

Finally, thank you to the students and faculty involved with the Georgetown English Master Program. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with you.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my grandparents.

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Introduction:

In the early fourteenth century, around what is today Lake Constance in Switzerland, it appears that a sister of the Dominican convent of Töss composed an account of the visions experienced by another member of her community, Elizabeth of Töss (d. 1336) (Barratt “The Virgin” 125). The carefully crafted text showing Elizabeth’s spiritual progression in thirteen vision segments, *The Revelations of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary*, presents an apprentice Elizabeth receiving tutorials on prayer and the spiritual life first by Mary and later by Christ Himself. Some hundred years after its composition, *The Revelations* was being translated and read in England attached to the name of “Saint Elizabeth,” Elizabeth of Töss’s well-known aunt (McNamer 16).

Unfortunately, the original text of *The Revelations*—most likely in Middle High German—is no longer extant (Barratt “The Virgin” 135, n.3). There are however, twenty-seven other copies of *The Revelations* existing today in a variety of languages, which appear to have circulated during the Late Medieval period.¹ Despite the existence of two Middle English versions, relatively little scholarly work has been done on the text. Of the little that has, much of it has concerned itself with the authorship of *The Revelations*, or more aptly put, the identity of the author of the visions themselves: Elizabeth.² In his book *The Middle English Mystics*, Wolfgang Riehle first suggested that Saint Elizabeth (d. 1231), the well-known princess-saint (daughter of King Andreas II of Hungary), was most likely not the “Elizabeth” of *The*

Revelations. He posits Elizabeth of Töss as the likely candidate (31). The niece of Saint Elizabeth was also the daughter of a king (King Andreas III of Hungary), but, unlike her saintly aunt, Elizabeth of Töss was never married and spent much of her life in a Dominican convent (McNamer 12). Alexandra Barratt, in her article “The Revelations of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary: Problems of Attribution,” argues for Elizabeth of Töss’s role of visionary—a position further supported by Sarah McNamer in her 1996 Edition of two Middle English versions and one Latin version of *The Revelations*: Cambridge University Library MS Hh.i.11, The Wynkyn de Worde Incunabula, and Cambridge, Magdalene College MS F.4.14.

Leaving the visionary Elizabeth and moving to the literal author of the text, Elsbet Stigel (d. 1360?), also a sister of Töss, has been named as the possible scribe for *The Revelations* (Barratt “The Revelations” 8). Yet, upon closer inspection the reasons for choosing Stigel grow suspect, stemming mainly from attribution to her the role of author for the Töss Sister-Book and *The Vita of Elizabeth* (Lewis 24). Gertrud Jaron Lewis challenges Stigel’s assumed role of author of the Töss Sister-Book; she argues that this “conventional but outdated assumption” might stem from Johannes Meyer’s (d. 1485) editing and compiling of the Sister-Book in 1454 (24). For Lewis, Meyer’s positioning Stigel as author might simply have grown out of her known friendship with Henry Suso (24). Lewis states, “Johannes Meyer apparently wanted to attribute more authority to the Töss text by implying that, while written by a woman, it was composed under Suso’s tutelage” (24). Lewis’s weakening of Stigel’s position as

author of this Sister-Book simultaneously weakens her position as author of *The Revelations*.

In this thesis I would like to move beyond the discussions of authorship for *The Revelations* and begin to examine the text itself. In fact, I neither attempt to question the arguments for Elizabeth of Töss's role as the visionary in the text, nor do I deny that someone in the community acquainted with Elizabeth, either first-hand or close to it, wrote her visions down.³ Instead, I discuss the genre of the text and propose hypothetical medieval readings of *The Revelations*. *The Revelations* are often assumed to be hagiographic and/or an example of visionary, revelatory, or mystical writing. For example, Riehle writes that Margery Kempe's referral to Elizabeth's *Revelations* "indicate[s] that in England German female mysticism was considered exemplary" (32). If Elizabeth or her text is mentioned, it is generally amidst a grouping of continental female visionaries or mystics. Valerie Lagorio gives an overview of medieval continental female mystics, gathering together under the heading of "Germany" Hildegard von Bingen (d. 1179), Elizabeth von Schönau (d. 1165), Mechthild von Hackeborn (d. 1298), Mechthild von Magdeburg (d. 1282?), the women of "famous mystical centers" like Töss, Margaret Ebner (d. 1351), Christine Ebner (d. 1356), Adelheid Langmann (d. 1375), and Elsbet Stagel, to name just a few (163-74). The unmentioned Elizabeth of Töss would most certainly be listed here as well. Though Lagorio is attempting to show an "ongoing mystical continuum" to which all these women belong (163) and though there is undeniably an overlap between *The*

Revelations and these other writings, a close reading of *The Revelations* themselves reveals striking differences between it and the other texts in this continuum.

One large point of departure is the structure of *The Revelations*. Barratt, in her article “The Virgin and the Visionary in the Revelation of St. Elizabeth,” calls our attention to the organization and craft in the text when she writes, “Though the visionary herself must have been the point of origin for the *Revelations* of St. Elizabeth, the arrangement of material shows considerable literary skill for which the redactor should take the credit” (127). Barratt adds, “The individual revelations seem deliberately structured to demonstrate the saint’s progress in the spiritual life” (128). This quality of deliberateness permeates everything in the text. Through repetition of patterns, a demonstration of spiritual progressions, and a call to imitate, *The Revelations* actively work to engage its audience in a specific reading experience. More than a convent legend that borders on hagiography (indeed, through its later misattribution to Saint Elizabeth, becomes hagiography), more than another example of personal revelations, *The Revelations* create an experience of prayer for readers. That is, the text of *The Revelations* appears to fall within the genre of devotion. A close reading seems to show that it was written to serve as a kind of devotional tool for the sisters of Töss.

In the following thesis, I attempt to use the context of Töss to form larger arguments around the initial purposes of the text and the way it was read. Laying aside more familiar conversation of authorship, I instead try to piece together an original

purpose of devotion for the text in Töss as well as further explore this devotional reading later on in the context of England. I begin in chapter one with the convent of Töss—underscoring the practices and expectations most likely held by the sisters of this convent and keeping in mind the implication that these aspects are critical to our understanding of the text’s initial function. Then in chapter two, I step firmly into the structure and patterns of *The Revelations* themselves, attempting to establish my argument for a new genre classification with textual examples.⁴ In my third chapter, I establish the uniqueness of *The Revelations* by situating the text amidst other, seemingly similar writings of the period. Then, finally, I move in chapter four to England. In this chapter, I look at a selected group of *The Revelations*’s English readers, laywomen and sisters, and surmise how their reading might have compared to a devotional reading of the text in the convent of Töss.⁵

Chapter One: Piecing Together a Töss Context

Töss, like many of the convents of its time, began as a beguinage (Lewis 21). Lewis tells us that the convent “flourished both spiritually and economically throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, normally housing between sixty and one hundred women at any given time (23); Lagorio notes that “in 1350 [Töss] had over 100 religious” (172). Thus, *The Revelations*, assumedly composed sometime after Elizabeth’s death in 1336, would have been written during a period of confidence within the convent.⁶ The text can be viewed as embodying a certain level of comfort and security in the way of life it speaks of, perpetuates, and even celebrates.

The Interactions of Convents in the Fourteenth Century

Unfortunately, we have relatively little access to the details of daily life in the convent of Töss. The Töss Sister-Book remains yet to be translated and published, and a Western scholar must access it through secondary sources such as studies on the Sister-Books in general or studies of writing from other convents. This borrowing, on one hand contributing to the scholarly homogenizing of writing that upon closer inspection emerges quite distinct, on the other hand is justified by the interactions between the convents and the sisters. Töss did not exist entirely in cloistered isolation. Rather the continental convents, especially those in the areas around what is today Germany, Switzerland, and Hungary, were fairly interconnected. In his book *The Mystics of Engelthal: Writings from a Medieval Monastery*, Leonard Hindsley asserts of the Engelthal Sister-Book and Engelthal revelations:

These writings were recorded as documents of faith for the edification not only of the nuns and associates of Engelthal *but for a wide range of other interested parties throughout the German-speaking lands*. The influence of these women [like Christine Ebner and Adelheid Langmann] spread through the letters of the Friends of God and through the dissemination of manuscript copies to other monasteries of both men and women and of various spiritual traditions—Dominican, Franciscan, Cistercian, Augustinian (xiv, my emphasis).

This awareness of other convents and the spirituality happening within them validates a certain amount of scholarly borrowing from one convent to the next. Insights into mystical convents like Engelthal, any of the other Dominican convents with Sister-Books (Adelhausen, Diessenhofen, Gotteszell, Kirchberg, Oetenbach, Unterlinden, and Weiler (Lewis 1)), and other non-Dominican convents within the same region, shed light on the Töss context out of which *The Revelations* grew.

What are some examples of the overlaps between these convents? Hindsley names friars such as Henry Suso (d.1366), Meister Eckhart (d.1328), and John Tauler (d.1361), and the priest Henry of Nördlingen (d. 1352?) as critical pieces in the sharing of spiritual ideas and sisterly writing⁷ (xiii). These men provide proof that at least some of the sisters were aware of each other and each other's work. For example, in 1351 Christine Ebner was visited by Henry of Nördlingen, "the spiritual father, friend, and later follower" of Maria Medingen's Margaret Ebner (d. 1351) and through him Christine learned of "the teachings of Suso and Tauler" (Hindsley xxi). Suso was the spiritual father of Elsbet Stigel of Töss. Thus, in this single exchange, Henry of

Nördlingen and Suso joined at least three Dominican convents: Engelthal, Maria Medingen, and Töss.

Aside from records of the friars' and priests' movements, there is also evidence that some convents were in direct contact with the writings of other convents. Rebecca Garber traces Mechthild von Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of Divinity* to Engelthal (166, n.8), which Hindsley confirms (16). And, Frank Tobin asserts that the later writing of Mechthild von Magdeburg indicates she was responding to feedback from earlier work ("Mechthild" 5). Additionally, sometime after 1424 a collection of writings from Töss containing *vitas* of Elizabeth of Thuringen (d. 1231), Margaretha of Hungary (d. 1270), and Elizabeth of Hungary was copied and housed along with parts of the Töss Sister-Book in the Diesselhoffen convent's scriptorium (Lewis 60, 62). Therefore, though the text of *The Revelations* needs not be in direct conversation with women or audiences beyond its convent walls, as a text of Töss it was shaped by a larger current of values, prayer practices, visionary and mystical experiences, and spiritual goals. Laurie Finke writes,

These women did not live and write in total isolation. They were aware of the existence of other famous mystics. Indeed, they saw themselves as part of a tradition of exceptional religious women. Younger mystics often modeled their lives and writing on those of their predecessors (29).

By looking at this larger current, we can pinpoint more specifically what would have been happening in Töss.

Following the Rules and Spiritual Advancement

The convent of Töss would have followed the Dominican sisters' Constitutions, Constitutions based on the *Rule of St. Augustine* and designed for the sisters by Humbolt of Romans (d. 1277) (Lewis 6). The Constitutions "formed the practical mysticism upon which all progress in religious life would be based" (Hindsley 6). They figured the sister as the bride of Christ and required her to adorn herself with exterior virtues to meet her spouse (Hindsley 5).⁸ These virtues would be achieved through time, energy, and adherence to the convent's rules. In his essay "Enclosure," Christopher Cannon states, "It is also the case that an ethics entirely based on regulation will tend to equate adherence to the rules with moral excellence no matter what those rules happen to be [...]" (111). Cannon's idea fits nicely with Töss and the Dominican convents, where obedience was stressed.⁹ In fact, the larger ideological framework behind the Constitutions was that a sister's physical obedience to the daily, mundane orders of the convent as spelled out in the Constitutions would bring the sister spiritual achievements and advances (Hindsley 6). The Constitutions contained rules on clothing, rules on daily work and tasks, rules on penances, rules on the construction of convent buildings and dwellings, and, of course, rules on silence, fasting, and prayer (Hindsley 6). A sister who upheld her part in following the rules laid before her would move closer to Christ—a movement evidenced by mystical encounters, visions, or other signs of holiness (Hindsley 6-7). Likewise, we can

imagine that the reverse was true as well: a sister who was not experiencing signs of a union with Christ, was not following the rules closely enough and must work harder.

Prayer Practices in Töss

One of the main subjects addressed by the Constitutions was prayer. In Töss, prayer intertwined – indeed, made up – the sisters’ daily schedules, with “the horarium function[ing] to sanctify every moment of the day in balanced rhythm of community prayer, private prayer, and *lectio divina*, labor, eating, and sleeping (Hindsley 11).

Seven times a day, the sisters celebrated the hours of *lectio divina*: matins, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline (Hindsley 11). During these times, the sisters would gather in the chapel or church and sing the psalms. The Constitution states:

The Sisters assist all together at Matins and at all the canonical hours, unless some are dispensed for a reasonable cause. All the canonical hours must be recited in the church, distinctly and without precipitation, so that the Sisters will not lose devotion and that other duties may not be impeded (quoted in Hindsley 12).

So a major part of convent life was communal prayer. To this Anne Winston-Allen adds, “Between reading and singing services for the dead and performing the monastic office, convent women spent at least four to five hours of their day in choral prayer” (58).

Furthermore, a sister was expected to spend time alone in private devotion and contemplation. This private prayer appears to have consisted of a variety of activities, still common today. For example, sisters could pray with visual objects as guides, inspirations, and references. In his book *Nuns As Artists: The Visual Culture of a*

Medieval Convent, Jeffrey Hamburger examines twelve *Nonnenarbeiten* or *kleine Andachtsbilder* that are still kept in the Benedictine abbey of St. Walburg in Eichstätt of Bavaria, Germany (4).¹⁰ Hamburger's study gives a vivid portrait of how a sister might visually read and pray with a *kleine Andachtsbilder* in front of her. Of these works of art, he writes, "[N]uns made them an integral, even indispensable, part of their piety"; these visual prayer tools were entirely shaped by "the spirituality that informed them" (Hamburger 4). Other private prayer practices included saying the rosary, reading devotional or religious books and sermons, and praying in various body positions. Describing the degree of physicality the sisters could bring to their private prayer, Winston-Allen notes:

In private exercises, requiring a kind of calisthenics, some women worked out like spiritual athletes, praying in different postures—with outstretched arms, kneeling, face to the ground, or prostrate—mentally weaving imaginary 'gifts' for the Virgin and Child or a 'mantle to cloak a deceased sister in the other world' (60).

Whether intensely focusing on an object or physically exhausting one's self, private prayer seems to have been a craft, a skill, and an activity at which a sister must work. But the work of prayer does not seem to have been in vain. As promised in the Constitutions, a sister might expect a visit from the divine. Creating a sense of the heightened expectations and activities within the convents, Barbara Newman writes:

Specific practices conducive to visionary experience included the rigorous fasting observed in some communities; the hours devoted to *lectio divina*, or scriptural reading interspersed with meditation; the repetitive chanting of the Divine Office; and the custom of returning to one's cell for prayer or sleep between the predawn office of matins and the hour of prime (14).

By putting effort in these activities of prayer, the sisters expected to directly interact with their Spouse, Christ, or any of his companions, Mary and the saints. This expectation—that “mystical experiences were considered to be the natural outcome of a nun’s spiritual development if she were faithful to the Dominican way of life and allowed herself to be formed in prayer and ascetical practices” (Hindsley 22)—cannot be emphasized enough when recreating the context out of which *The Revelations* emerged and was first intended to be read. Such an expectation would have been reinforced through the mendicant friars whom Hindsley tells us emphasized “a practical mysticism that should be experienced by the hearer” (16), through the larger continuum of continental female mysticism, which both Finke and Lagorio allude to (Finke 29, Lagorio 163), and through the sisters themselves. Newman argues that “merely observing that some people customarily had visions at certain times, as when receiving Communion or meditating before the cross on Good Friday, made it easier for others in the same community to do likewise” (15).

In sum, the sisters of Töss lived their lives, as governed by the Constitutions, with the purpose of moving closer to Christ. Their life’s work was the honing of the prayer and devotional skills to achieve experiences establishing this closeness. That is, the sisters believed that by living out the mandates of the Constitutions and by rigorously throwing themselves into imaginative and sensual practices of prayer, they

would have visions and mystical encounters. In describing an original audience for *The Revelations* then, it is imperative that we hold these expectations in mind.

Before looking at the text more carefully, I would like to stress one more aspect of prayer life in the Dominican convent of Töss that seems pertinent: the practice of reading religious material aloud. Hindsley asserts that the refectory in Engelthal was considered to be a place of both spiritual and physical nourishment (9). He states, “Because of this, meals were always taken in silence, accompanied by readings” (9). For example, the Engelthal sisters would have listened to the Constitutions at least once a week while eating in the refectory in order to be “constantly reminded of the connection between observances and the call to spiritual progress” (Hindsley 6). Other hagiographical texts like “the *Legende aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine” or texts like “the *Vitae Fratrum* by Gerard de Frachet” were read during this time as well (10). In Töss, I would suggest that the text of *The Revelations* is a likely candidate for this practice of reading aloud for spiritual betterment. Its compact, almost circular nature, its emphasis on dialogue, and its relatively short length are highly conducive to an oral sharing like the kind Hindsley describes in the Engelthal refectory. That said, whatever is the case, whether read aloud or silently during times of private prayer, let us now look at the text itself. How do *The Revelations* want to be read? Based on the above context of obedience to the rules and daily prayer that was expected to bring about divine encounters, how might this text have functioned in Töss—or at least been written to function?

Chapter Two: A Close Reading of *The Revelations* as A Devotional Text

In a similar manner to the devotional uses of the *kleine Andachtsbilder* from St. Walburg, *The Revelations* are tailored to convent life, instructing and modeling for readers certain prayer practices and spiritual goals. At the same time, like the *kleine Andachtsbilder*, the text appears to bring readers closer to achieving these goals. The text's division into segments (highly conducive to being read a few at a time and short enough to be read in one sitting – either aloud or quietly), its repeated structure (allowing its audience to more easily predict and prepare for future actions in the narrative), its descriptions of spiritual progression through effort (reminiscent of the kind the Constitutions espoused), its conflation of Mary and Elizabeth (simultaneously including its sisterly audience), its emphasis on imitation, and, finally, its sense of immediacy—all show that it is not only possible that *The Revelations* were written to function as a devotional tool in Töss, but, I would suggest, highly likely.

Thirteen Vision Segments

The Revelations are, in my own words, a tight text. This tightness is exemplified through the text's division into thirteen vision segments—vision segments which repeat plot patterns of previous segments and seem set up to demonstrate progress. The text was not put together without thought. The first through eighth segments build a pattern of lesson and response between Mary and Elizabeth. Segment nine, as Barratt points out, feels transitional, as it “is the only one that does not take the form of a dialogue” and can be seen as “a typically hagiographic narrative of how god

granted Elizabeth the special privilege of St. John the Evangelist as confessor” (“The Virgin” 127). Segments ten through thirteen form a group as well—one that illustrates Elizabeth’s ever-improving relations with Christ so that, by the end, she might be considered to experience “an imaginative or even intellectual vision” (Barratt “The Virgin” 128). The entire text can be viewed as being closely held together through repeated patterns and a structure that portrays progression.

Patterns in the Vision Segments

In the first segment, we are introduced to Elizabeth in prayer, disturbed that she has sought “her spouse Ihesu Cryste with deuoute herte and drery spyryte and founde hym not as she was wonte” (57).¹¹ It is to this worried Elizabeth that Mary appears, saying “Elysabeth, yff thou wolde bee my dysciple, I wolde be thy maystres; and yf pou wolde be my seruant, I wolde be thy lady” (57). This plot pattern of Elizabeth’s worrying, (often in the form of tears), and Mary or Christ’s arrival in response is repeated in segments two, three, nine, and twelve. It establishes a call and response rhythm to *The Revelations*, highly reminiscent of movements in prayer, where the praying person makes a plea to the divine and the divine responds.

Recalling the call and response format is another pattern of divine lesson and human response, which emerges in the division of *The Revelations*’s vision segments. This pattern, too, can be seen to echo basic prayer movements. In *The Revelations*, Mary or Christ speaks to Elizabeth, with Elizabeth responding to their holy words either successfully or conscious of her failure. For example, in the first vision

segment, Mary tells Elizabeth to “Flee chydynge and streues, bacbytynges and murmurracions, and murmurs that be made of the gyue noo heryng to theym, ne let not thy hert be tormentyd therefore” (59). Immediately following, at the start of segment two, this warning is shown distressing Elizabeth. We see the visionary crying while she prayed “full bitterly, dredynge that she hadde not fully kepte the forsayd war[n]ynge of the glorious Virgyne” (59). In segments four and five a similar movement occurs, however this time more successfully for Elizabeth. In the extensive dialogue of segment four, Mary provides an image of herself praying in “an unusual example of ‘participatory’ prayer, striking in its reflexivity” (McNamer 109):

The v was *pat he wold make me to see pat time in pe whiche pat blessyd mayden sholde bee born* pat [after] prophetes forsayenges shold bere his Sone, & pat he wold kepe my eyes with *pe whiche I myghte beholde here* [...] (65, my emphasis).

Mary’s reflecting on the Mother of God is copied by Elizabeth in the fifth segment. We are told, “Ouer that in a nyght whyles Elysabeth, Crystis seruaunt, began to thynke how God the gloryous Fader was plesid in the gloryous mayde marye yet whyles she lyued, for that he wold his Sone toke flesshe of her” (67). Additionally, in the fifth segment, Mary tells Elizabeth that she prayed for grace and virtue because, like Elizabeth, she “helde me that tyme as vyle and wretchidde and vnworthy the grace of God as thou holdest the now, and moche more vnworthy” (67), and in the sixth segment Mary speaks about how she attained grace through praying “daye and nyghte wyth full brennyng desyre” and through “wepying with full bytter mornying” (79).

Once again, Elizabeth's actions reflect her having retained Mary's words. In the seventh segment, Elizabeth appears in "longe prayer," in which she is described as crying and praying that God "wolde gyue hyr grace by pe whiche she myght loue hym wyth all hyr herte" (83). This pattern of lesson and response between Mary and Elizabeth culminates in the eighth segment of *The Revelations* when we are explicitly told that "Saynt Elysabeth prayed and in hir prayeng she thought wyth deuocyon of sowle *in what wyse the blyssed Mayde prayed, as she had shewed hyr as it is sayde before*" (87, my emphasis).

The repetition of these patterns allows a listening audience to more easily imagine, predict, and prepare for the future happenings of the text. Wolfgang Iser speaks of the actions involved with reading: anticipation and retrospection. A reader creates a picture of the text while reading—a "virtual dimension" that combines both the reader's response to the text and the text itself (Iser 54). Based on the information currently available to her, the reader must anticipate future events in the text; then, as she continues to read, she adjusts her previous anticipations to correspond with new information (Iser 53-57). So the virtual dimension is always shifting. Iser notes that generally, when one's reading anticipations are fully met, we consider the text to be "a defect in a literary text" and boring (53). He writes, "A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (51). However, for *The Revelations* the use of patterns—notably occurring

more frequently at the beginning of the text—skirt away from being defective or boring by instead functioning to lull the reader into the text’s prayer-like movements. Like the apprentice Elizabeth, the listener of *The Revelations* takes on an apprenticed prayer position. The reading begins emphasizing patterns and, thus, to a certain extent, is predictable. The patterns focus the reader into larger rhythms of prayer: call and response or lesson and response. By allowing the reader to step easily into these rhythms—that is, to recognize them and anticipate them almost unconsciously—*The Revelations* simultaneously induce a prayer-like state in the reader and set the reader up to imaginatively advance like and alongside Elizabeth.

Progression in the Text

This idea of advancement highlights another quality of *The Revelations*: their emphasis on progression. Even at a segment level, *The Revelations* introduce a pattern of amplification. What happens in one segment is expanded upon or heightened in a later segment. For example, we can summarize the first and second segments down to two actions: in the first Mary makes a contract with Elizabeth and, in the second, Mary gives a lesson on prayer: saying the Hail Mary (57-61). Segments three and four repeat this sequence of events in an amplified fashion. Once again Mary makes her contract with Elizabeth, but this time it is raised from a verbal agreement to a written charter, witnessed by St. John the Evangelist. Mary says, “But I wold that thou make a charter to me of this chesyng and thy wylfull byhetyngis, and that thou may not slyde from this purpose” (61). Furthermore, Mary expands her lesson on prayer and

delineates the specific prayer practices she used (with the implication being that so should Elizabeth): her studying of the three commandments (63), her seven askings, which include her self-referential request to see the Mother of God (65), and her praying for grace (67). She even adds physical details to her description of her prayer, saying that she “rose at mydnyght” and stood “before the aulte[r]” (65). Thus, like the heightening of the contract from segments one to three, the lesson on prayer is drawn out from segments two to four.

In addition to this amplification trend in *The Revelations*, the text also works to show multiple spiritual progressions. One of these progressions is, of course, Elizabeth’s. Again, we recall Barratt remarks, “The individual revelations seem deliberately structured to demonstrate the saint’s progress in the spiritual life” (“The Virgin” 128). Elizabeth’s two interactions with people provide a clear example of this progress (“The Virgin 128). Barratt states:

The fifth revelation opens with Elizabeth’s anger at the unthinking behavior of one of her companions, for which she is rebuked by the Virgin; this contrasts with the eleventh revelation [sic: tenth], in which she is injured far more seriously by another woman, but reacts with greater maturity [...] (“The Virgin” 128).

The text thus works to show Elizabeth’s progress and highlight the exterior changes that occur because of her prayer and attention to Mary’s lessons. In fact, Elizabeth’s interaction with others demonstrates again the interweaving pattern of lesson and response. The first instance in which Elizabeth lashes out at her interrupter and is rebuked by Mary occurs directly after Mary tells Elizabeth of her younger self wanting

“to doo seruyse to all the ladyes that came to the temple, for loue of her Maker” because they might be the Mother of God (69). She also commands Elizabeth to “take it mekely” (69). Elizabeth’s curt words to her fellow sister then (69), overtly counter both of Mary’s statements. Conversely, the second instance of Elizabeth’s pious reaction to the woman who wronged her follows Mary’s lesson (in segment eight) that Elizabeth should pray for the healing of others, “for therby shall grace bee encresyd to the and to other, and thy prayers shall be fruytfull” (91). It is not surprising then that Elizabeth chooses to pray for her: “O swete & ay[-l]astyng God, that gyldest goode for yll, I beseche the that thou yelde to her that bereth on me this wronge a notable gladnesse of holsom comforte soo that she haue ioye therof as I sholde ioye if I were thy good doughter” (93).

However Elizabeth is not the only character who makes spiritual progress in the text. Again in a rather surprising fashion, *The Revelations* have Mary speaking of her own life of spiritual growth and progression: God saw her, God was pleased, God chose her to be the Mother of Christ. Mary tells her story as one advancing towards a higher spiritual union with Christ in much the same way a sister in Töss would. Mary says:

Ryght soo, God the Fader first he ordeyned and tempered in me all my st[e]ringes and all my wyttes as well of the soule as of the body. After that he touched and ordeyned with the fynger of his Ghost all my saweys & my werkes to the pesaunce of him (69).

In segment four, Mary emphasizes how, holding herself “vyle and wretchidde,” she had to ask God for grace just as Elizabeth must (67). Such a statement could perhaps be overlooked as insignificant if were not extensively repeated again in section six.

Mary says:

My doughter, though thynkest that I hadde so moche grace without traueylle of my Creatour, but it is not so, out-take the grace of halowyng in my moders wombe. Alle other grace I hadde wyth moche trauell of soule and body, contynually prayng daye and nyghte wyth full brennyng desire, and wepyng with full bytter morning, and euer thynkyng, spekyng, and workyng that I trowed were most pleasyng to my Creatour, eschewyng wyth souerayne keepyng me fro all offenses of hym, ye, were it neuer so lytell (79).

Mary’s spiritual work and subsequent progression are so successful that she receives the highest reward offered to a woman within this system: giving birth to Christ. Thus, in Mary we see what was, for the sisters of Töss, the archetypal success story. If obedience to the Constitutions and daily prayer brought about spiritual progress proven through visual or mystical encounters with Christ, then in the sisterly Mary of *The Revelations*, we witness the achievement of the goals of a religious female. Mary who prayed nightly in a manner similar to matins (65), Mary who “toke to my stodeyng to kepe [the three commandments] with souerayn besynes and wyth all my myght” (63), and who prayed to God for grace, lived the life of Elizabeth. Because she did it so well, the text implies, she became the Mother of God.

But we can qualify both Mary and Elizabeth’s spiritual progressions in *The Revelations*: they are the result of time and effort. Mary’s words convey a sense of prayerful labor to achieve union with Christ, and Elizabeth’s actions and responses in

the text do the same. The union with Christ does not come miraculously overnight, the text tells us, but with time spent in prayer. For example, the text's two large metaphors for prayer each deliberately describe time and effort. The first image Mary gives to Elizabeth is the metaphor of the harp or fiddle, (an image that recalls Mary's contract with Elizabeth, asking her to become an "open instrumente" (61)). Mary describes God as slowly beginning to play her. She says, "Forwhy first he temperyth it, that it maketh a swete sowne and acordyng sowne, and afterward, ledyng and touchyng, he synget sommethyng wyth the sowne of it" (67, 69). Mary then explains the metaphor in terms of her own prayer life before directly instructing Elizabeth to do the same: "Therefore, doughter, on that same maner [...]" (69). In a parallel fashion, in segment eight, Mary gives a very elaborate prayer metaphor of a well, which also conveys the time needed for spiritual progress (87). First, a person must look at the base of the hill to see which way the water flows. Then, he digs into the appropriate side of the hill to find the beginning of the spring. Next, he establishes the place of the well, and, finally, he builds a wall around the well, a pillar in the middle of it, and pipes all around for others to access it. As with her metaphor of the instrument, Mary here explains her meaning explicitly. She says to Elizabeth that just as the person made the well, "This dyd I ghostely" through the studying of the Ten Commandments, her "redyng, thynkyng, and prayeng," and her pursuit of virtues and grace (87, 89). Once again, Mary ends directly instructing Elizabeth. She leaves her metaphor—and her series of instructions to Elizabeth—saying:

Thyse thynges, my dere doughter, I saye to the that thou lerne to aske grace of god in prayer wyth fayth and mekenesse, as thou knowest that I dyde by thynges aforesaid; for wythouten prayer, it is vnpossyble to gete the grace of God (89).

Elizabeth's progression within the text also could be characterized as a slower progression—one involving time, energy, and human setbacks. An example of this is that *The Revelations* begin *in medias res*. We are told that Elizabeth, in the practice of spending time in private prayer, was disturbed because she was not finding Christ “as he was wonte to doo other tymes” (57). Thus, Elizabeth already has had interactions with Christ. Her instructions from Mary do not signal a starting point, but a break amidst a progression that has already begun. Additionally, in segment nine we are told that Elizabeth has been experiencing “a spyrytuall dysese during thre yere, and that was for thought that she mysght not haue her confessour as ofte as she wolde bee confessyd” (91). Her spiritual progression is not shown to be one of only upwards motion, but is much more gradual. Just as with Mary's, Elizabeth's spiritual progress hearkens back to the Töss Constitutions and idea that a close relationship to Christ grows out of a sister's daily prayer work and obedience.

This presence of Mary and Elizabeth's gradual spiritual progressions can be seen to accomplish two goals for *The Revelations*. On one hand, the text sets up a realistic and pertinent ideal for the sisters of Töss. On the other hand, the text incorporates its readers into another bigger reading movement – this time, a movement

of advancing or bettering. To return to Iser's thoughts on the reading experience, such a movement keeps the reader interested in the text. Iser asserts:

The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror; but at the same time, the reality which this process helps to create is one that will be *different* from his own (since, normally, we tend to be bored by texts that present us with things we already know perfectly well ourselves) (56-57).

A Töss reading of *The Revelations* applies here in multiple ways. Mirroring the spiritual progression espoused by the Constitutions and inducing a kind of prayer-like stance in its readers through patterns and repetition, *The Revelations* also allow the reader to create and imagine herself as spiritually advancing. That is, the text allows the reader to imagine herself in the different reality, the different virtual dimension, of being in a more grace-filled state, closer to her Beloved, Christ.

To describe more fully the reader's advancement in *The Revelations*, I would like to look at the body imagery in the text.¹² The idea, linking the body and devotion, first becomes apparent in Mary's self-referential request to have her eyes, ears, tongue, feet, and knees so that she might see, hear, touch, run to, and kneel in front of the Mother of God (65). The magnitude of Mary's desire to worship is expressed through the parts of her body. In listing out body parts, Mary allows the reader to simultaneously imagine herself serving the Mother of God in such a bodily way. With each listing, the reader in turn projects the service and worship of Mary into her own limbs. Therefore the reading is both very physical and very imaginative. It also introduces an

association between physical actions and divine love. Then, later in segment seven, Mary tells Elizabeth of the “mede” of the three martyrs: Bartholomew, Lawrence, and John the Evangelist (85)—all of whom could be seen as showing their love for God bodily through their graphic deaths. This description comes in the form of a challenge from Mary; Mary’s voice speaks to Elizabeth in a tone decidedly different from any of her previous visions. Mary demands of Elizabeth, “Who is he that loueth God wyth all hys herte? Where it be pou Elysabeth?” and Elizabeth cannot answer (85). Mary’s challenge, Elizabeth’s silence, and Mary’s subsequent description of each of the saints’ demonstrations of love for God (once again in a repetitive, rhythmic fashion) pulls the reader in more forcefully. The reader must answer the question, and, like Elizabeth, she must decide the extent to which she is willing to bodily show her love.¹³

At the end of *The Revelations*, this association reaches a high point. Christ tells Elizabeth of the ultimate example of this physical kind of love: “For yf thou haue offendyd God wyth all the membrys of thy body, I was tormentyd in all the membris of my body for thyn and for all mankindes synnes” (95), and Elizabeth’s final lesson is her vision in segment thirteen where she sees a “full fayre haonde that hadde longe fingers and the palme large and brode, and in the myddes of the palme was a wounde all redde of blode” (97). For the readers, these vivid descriptions, one of Christ’s human body and one more abstract, are easily imagined and visualized. By doing so, the reader of *The Revelations* simultaneously sees what Elizabeth sees. Christ speaks to Elizabeth and to her; Christ’s bodily love was for Elizabeth and for her. Elizabeth’s

progression towards a deeper understanding of human, physical worship and love for God occurs for her as well. A yearning to express devotion and worship through the body has expanded to an understanding of salvation through the Crucifixion—culminating in a vision that makes this salvation very personal.

Conflating Elizabeth and Mary

Another devotional attribute of *The Revelations* is its conflation of Mary and Elizabeth—or, more precisely, how Mary reflects the life of a sister in a convent like Elizabeth and how Elizabeth in turn copies and imitates this sisterly Mary. This blurring of identities has been noted by other scholars, as well. Barratt asserts that “the picture of the life the Virgin leads in the temple is clearly based on Elisabeth’s own life as a nun” (“The Virgin” 129). McNamer points out the unusualness of *The Revelations*’s description of Mary in mystical ecstasy—ecstasy that a sister might experience or hope to experience (110). I have already touched on the deliberate portrayal of Mary as needing to spiritually progress and work for grace. To emphasize the deliberateness of this portrayal further, I suggest that by doing so, *The Revelations* arbitrarily put themselves in a rather ambiguous position on Mary’s grace. McNamer asserts that Elizabeth’s question to Mary about being born without sin may be a timely and strategic reference to the period’s controversy over Mary’s Immaculate Conception (109). Mary’s strong assertion, “I were so, douteless,” according to McNamer, “[M]ay have greater significance than is immediately apparent,” putting the text solidly on the side of Mary’s sinlessness (109). If such is the case, then Mary’s repeated assertions of

needing to ask and work for grace become all the more deliberate, as they could technically undermine the “douteless” position of Mary’s birth without sin. Their inclusion must be justified by serving a larger goal in *The Revelations*. That is, Mary’s sisterly identity appears more important than a clear stance on her grace. Comfortable with a slightly ambiguous position on the Immaculate Conception, *The Revelations* instead focus on blurring the lifestyles of Mary and Elizabeth and establishing Mary as, like Elizabeth and the sisters of Töss, in need of continual prayer to achieve God’s grace.

Aside from spiritual progression, the collapsing of Mary and Elizabeth is furthered through the two women’s occasionally identical responses to a higher power throughout the course of the narrative. One of the first actions of Elizabeth’s that becomes imprinted in a reader’s mind is an image of the visionary kneeling, hands clasped together, in front of Mary. After Mary approaches her with her request of a contract in segment one, the text carefully describes Elizabeth’s responding body position: “Thenne Saint Elysabeth, fa[l]lyng vppon thte erthe, honouryd her; and kneling, she layde her hondes ionyd togyder bytwyxt the hondes of the blessyd Virgyn” (59). In a text that gives little detail to the physical details of Elizabeth, this descriptive image of its heroine stands out. When Mary returns to make her written contract with Elizabeth in front of Saint John in the third segment, this portrait is once again recalled: “Thenne Saint Elysabeth, knelynge vppon the erth and wyth her hondes ioyned, honoured her [...]” (61). What is exciting about Elizabeth’s action is that, in

the sixth segment, it is repeated almost exactly by Mary in her account of the Annunciation. After Gabriel appears to Mary, Mary tells Elizabeth, “I fyll to the erthe, and knelynge wyth my hondes ioynde I honoured [...]” (81). Thus, through the visual portrait of Elizabeth first imprinted in the readers’ minds and later reinforced by Mary, there is once again both the conflation of Elizabeth and Mary and the reinforcing of a specific kind of prayer.

Such a paralleling between Elizabeth and Mary occurs other times in *The Revelations* as well. For example, Elizabeth’s prayerful response to the unjust treatment she receives from another woman is immediately followed by a voice from Heaven saying that He is pleased (93). This voice recalls *The Revelations*’s account of Mary’s Annunciation in which a voice is heard saying “Mayden of Dauyd kynred, thou shalt bere my Sonne” (75). Additionally, McNamer calls to our attention the wording of Elizabeth’s response to Mary’s contract, in which Elizabeth paraphrases lines spoken by Mary in scriptural passages of the Annunciation (107). Barratt writes, “Indeed throughout it is noticeable that the text models the Virgin on Elizabeth rather than vice versa, so that the Virgin, like Elizabeth, is constructed as an ecstatic visionary communicating her spiritual experiences to a third person” (“The Virgin” 129). In fact, I would add to Barratt’s assertion and say that, within the text, there is a circular movement between Elizabeth and Mary, in which both women’s actions, words, and experiences repeat, recall, echo, and reinforce each other. The identities of the two women collapse together, reinforcing one Töss convent lifestyle and prayer model:

praying day and night, praying in front of the alter, praying with thoughts on the Mother of God, praying for God's grace, praying for the healing of others, praying with holy books and scripture, and so on. This identity—that of a devoted, obedient sister who is continually asking for grace from God—is one that is further reinforced through the similar experiences of the audience we can imagine hearing the text. An action such as kneeling with one's hands joined in prayer would have hardly been foreign to *The Revelations*'s readers in Töss. Like Elizabeth, it would have been an action they had done many times daily and perhaps were even doing while reading – or hearing – *The Revelations*. Thus, in this familiarity and self-recognition, once again, the audience enters into the movements of the text.

Imitation

Speaking of larger trends in medieval spirituality, Ellen Ross argues, “Comprehension at an intellectual level [was] superseded by a deeper level of understanding through experience or feeling. Further, there was the conviction that one of the best ways to learn to experience is by way of imitation” (47). This privileging of imitation is also espoused by *The Revelations*; the text stresses the idea of learning by example. Not only is the use of imitation shown through the blending of Mary and Elizabeth's words and actions, but this imitation is verbally elicited when Mary charges Elizabeth to act “on that same maner” (69). In fact, through Mary, the text later inserts this desire for imitation into God's mouth. In Mary's recounting of

the Annunciation, she has God adding that just as Mary had desired to see and serve the Mother of God, so too will this devotion happen to her (75). God states:

Wote thou certeynly that the same worshy and reuerence that thou desired for to do to another mayden shall be done to the afore other. I wyll, forsothe, that thou be that mayden the whiche shall bere my Sonne (75).

In a referential and circular way, God's words predict (though textually after the fact) Elizabeth's service to Mary. Thus, Elizabeth's imitation of Mary is given God's authority in the text. Since this sisterly lifestyle is one and the same as that of the listening Töss audience, by extension this authority and call for imitation is transferred to the audience of *The Revelations* as well.

Immediacy and *The Revelations* as a Devotional Tool

Because they rely so heavily on dialogue, *The Revelations* contain a sense of immediacy, throwing the audience directly into an active relationship with Mary and Christ. Mary's and Christ's voices are so dominant and Elizabeth's role so ancillary that we can forget about this supposed heroine, with Mary and Christ speaking directly to the Töss readers instead. Mary, instructing Elizabeth, instructs the audience. Mary, modeling Elizabeth's prayer practices, models the audience's prayer practices. Christ appearing vividly to Elizabeth appears to the audience. If a sister reads the first eight segments, fully immersing herself in their prayerful movements and imagining the images they place before her, she too could feel herself having spiritually advanced. The lessons of Mary, the responses of Elizabeth, and the words and visions of Christ in *The Revelations* serve as a vehicle for Töss audience members to fulfill their own

spiritual goals—or at least work towards them. To use Hamburgers words describing the devotional *kleine Andachtsbilder* of St. Walburg's, *The Revelations* model and mirror the prayer life of Töss (83), as well as become a means of tangibly practicing this prayer. For a Töss sister reading *The Revelations*, the text becomes one that is present and immediate: Mary and Christ are speaking, teaching, relating, and modeling directly to her and for her. By doing so, the texts works not only to edify and inform, but to serve as a tool of devotion at the same time.

Chapter Three: Comparing *The Revelations* to Other Convent Writing

Hindsley writes, “The intensity and duration of mystical experiences among so many of the nuns compelled them and their chaplains to record the events in various literary modes so that others would know the wonders of God and be encouraged to live an authentically Christian life” (xiii-iv). *The Revelations* can be seen as one of these “literary modes.” The text is one piece of writing amidst a much larger continental current of female spirituality. Given this placement as one literary expression among many, it is important to look at the other writing emerging during *The Revelations*’s time period—writing that is so often categorized in the same scholarly grouping. What are the similarities between these texts and *The Revelations*? How do writings from Töss, like the Töss Sister-Book, compare to the text? How do revelations from nearby convents in the period compare? Even a brief glance at these other legendary, revelatory, and mystical accounts shows how *The Revelations* steps away from these genre classifications to which they are so frequently assigned.

The Revelations and the Töss Sister-Book

On one level, *The Revelations* and Sister-Books (from Töss and elsewhere) have many aspects in common. Aside from time and place, they share both written characteristics, (such as being episodic), as well as ideas, (such as experiences of audition or locution)¹⁴ (Lewis 76). Other characteristics we might pull from both *The Revelations* and the Sister-Books are prioritizing learnedness, obedience, the particular text’s authority, and the imitation of good examples (Lewis 33, 34, 39). Also, the

Sister-Books, like *The Revelations*, do not describe mystical experiences, visions, and other miraculous phenomenon first-hand, but rather present them in a mediated manner—speaking of another sister in the community and not of themselves. (In *The Revelations*, this mediation can be seen with Elizabeth’s experiences, but Mary gives us her experiences in the first person). Additionally, the Sister-Books also speak of the crying and holy tears of certain sisters. Lewis gives examples of holy criers from Töss: Mezzi Sidwibrin, Mezzi von Klingenberg, and Margret von Zürich (81). Elizabeth’s tears in *The Revelations* are not extraordinary, then.

Another large commonality between *The Revelations* and the Sister-Books is that both seek the betterment of their audiences. The Sister-Books state this outright, asserting that their audiences, upon hearing the miraculous account of their fellow sister, should be inspired to follow her example. Lewis tells us that an entry in the Töss Sister-Book ends saying, “If you lived like Richi von Schalchen, oh how greatly you would profit then” (39). Furthermore, though didactic, the Sister-Books seek an “equal footing” with their known audience (41). It is not a top-down didacticism, but one of modeling off one’s peers. Lewis writes:

Going one step beyond the usual assumption of medieval religious authors who generally presuppose an identical value system with their audience, these authors directly address a specific audience of like-minded women located in their immediate and wider vicinity. *They envision their work being read in the refectory and the workroom of their own and neighboring communities* (Lewis 41, my emphasis).

Lewis says that the Sister-Book writers wanted “the audience’s creative participation” and considered the story not finished until the readers lived like the examples in the text (41-42); she writes, “The Sister-Books overcome the boundaries normally found between author and audience” (42). In demanding this interaction, the Sister-Books seem to set themselves up as a kind of devotional tool, reminiscent of *The Revelations*. Yet, the similarities end there. Rather than an organized structure of thirteen vision segments to be used for devotion and spiritual improvement, the Sister-Books are of varying lengths and appear to have been produced over time, with different sisters adding to previous entries and sometimes digressing into other subject matters (Lewis 45-46). What is more, the Sister-Books speak directly about their convent—using the names of the sisters, telling of the convent’s origins, and relating outside events that can be traced historically. Such specificity is absent from *The Revelations*. Lastly, the Sister-Books provide example after example of sisters experiencing the miraculous or the mystical. In fact, Lewis points out that the frequency of “miracles, miracle stories, visions, and charisms” within the Sister-Books has generally invoked scorn and “ridicule” from scholars and readers alike (76). The Sister-Books describe experiences of levitation, the hearing of heavenly music, saintly children, and the receiving stigmata (Lewis 78-82). Mechthild von Stanz of Töss, we are told in the Töss Sister-Book, “saw the streams of water and blood running down from her heart” (Lewis 83). Another sister of Töss, Elsbet von Cellikon, is described “standing before her bed at night, and her body was so transparent and such a blissful radiance came from her that

there was no place in the dormitory where one could not have light enough to pick up a needle off the floor” (Lewis 85). In many ways, these moments overshadow *The Revelations*. Though we hear of mysticism through Mary’s words, as a whole *The Revelations* say very little about the miraculous, especially related to Elizabeth. By comparison to the Sister-Books, *The Revelations* appear subdued.

The Revelations and the Writing from Helfta

Caroline Walker Bynum, in her *Jesus As Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, states that the writings from the Benedictine/Cistercian monastery of Helfta “form the largest single body of women’s mystical writing in the period” (174). The Helfta monastery was located in Saxony, and like Töss its sisters most likely came “from wealthy, noble families in Thuringia and Saxony” (Bynum *Jesus* 175). For the interest of time, I have selected only two examples from Helfta, but they are two that have received much attention, both during the late Middle Ages and in scholarship today: Mechthild von Magdeburg and Mechthild von Hackeborn.

As she was a beguine to begin with before joining the Helfta community, even in her biography Mechthild von Magdeburg’s case begins to look different. She wrote throughout her life, beginning with *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, and her writing appears to have circulated while she was still living (Tobin “Mechthild” 5). Her fame might have been one of the reasons she was invited to Helfta in her later years; Tobin tells us that she was never entirely comfortable within its walls because the Helfta “sisters seem to have treated her less as a member of their community than as an object

of veneration to whom they looked for spiritual instruction” (“Mechthild” 2). These biographical differences acknowledged, Mechthild von Magdeburg did enter into a similar convent climate with similar expectations as Elizabeth’s Töss. However, the writing she produced looks nothing like *The Revelations*. Susan Clark comments that her writing “defies genre conventions as defined in modern literary criticism” (xiii). Clark points to the dynamic, “feistiness” of the personality that seeps through Mechthild von Magdeburg’s words (xiii)—a personality that is absent from the rather flat visionary of *The Revelations*. Additionally, by being very diverse, the format and presentation of Mechthild von Magdeburg’s revelations differ from *The Revelation*’s structure as well: some revelations “are epistolary, some admonitory, and some almost like shopping lists in their numerical ordering” (Clark xiv).¹⁵ Some even read like direct, psalm-like prayers to God. For example, Mechthild von Magdeburg writes, “Ah, Lord, love me much, and love me deeply and for a long time; for the more deeply you love me, the purer I shall become; the more you love me, the more beautiful I shall become; the longer you love me, the holier I shall become here on earth” (Mechthild 16). Nowhere in Mechthild von Magdeburg’s visions do we see the carefully structured format of *The Revelations*. While Mechthild von Magdeburg’s text is certainly didactic and written for the betterment of others—

Now in this book I am addressing all spiritual people, both the good and the evil, for if the pillars should fall, the whole work would not stand; it will refer only to me and will merely be a glorious revelation of my secret. All who want to study this book should read it nine times (Mechthild 5)—

its overt stating of this purpose and the scope of its audience are considerably different from *The Revelations*, whose didactic messages are mediated through the third person and whose desired audience seems likely to have been quite local and convent based.

Another woman whose writing could potentially parallel Elizabeth's *Revelations* is Mechthild von Hackeborn's *Book of Special Grace*. Mechthild von Hackeborn, a nun in Helfta from an early age, finally told others of her visions when she was older and sick; Bynum notes, "Two nuns received these confidences and wrote them down" (210). Comparing the *Book of Special Grace* to Gertrude the Great's *Herald of Divine Love*, Bynum writes of the similar values and spirituality in both of these Helfta works (210). She observes that they have "the same theological emphasis on God's glory and on the centrality of the eucharist" as well as similar themes of "God's sovereignty and accessibility; Christ as mediator who incorporates us into himself and restores his resemblance in our 'self,' which is created in his image; the eucharist as the occasion for this union or incorporation, symbolized especially by the heart of Jesus; the visionary herself as mediator to others" (Bynum *Jesus* 210).

Bynum's descriptions of the links between Gertrude the Great's and Mechthild von Hackeborn's writing alone is sufficient to set the work at odds with *The Revelations*. This is confirmed by a closer look at the text itself. For example, we hear of Mechthild von Hackeborn giving the infant Christ to each of the sisters and Christ kissing their hearts three times "full sweetly" (Barratt "Women's" 56). Like with Mechthild von Magdeburg, Mechthild von Hackeborn's presence is felt throughout her text; the

visionary herself plays an important role as the mediator to the divine. Unlike *The Revelations*, Mechthild von Hackeborn's text does not let its visionary slide into the background. Instead her sensations and viewpoint dominate the text.

The Revelations and the Revelations from Engelthal

I have already made comparisons between Engelthal and Töss, so it makes sense to quickly look at two of revelations from that convent: Christina Ebner's and Adelheid Langmann's. The first of these sisters, Christina Ebner, has been connected to an "autobiographical *Revelations*," a "hagiographical biography" or *vita*, and the Engelthal Sister-Book (Hindsley 65). Looking at her version of revelations, we see a few small similarities such as its beginning *in medias res* of the visionary's life: "Immediately Christina draws the reader into the ecstatic vision of her journey to Jerusalem to the house in which the Last Supper had taken place" (Hindsley 68).¹⁶ Yet again, Ebner's autobiographical revelations are decidedly different from *The Revelations* of Elizabeth. Though Hindsley qualifies the category of autobiography for Ebner, saying, "No background information about her birth, childhood, or entry into the monastery forms any part of this account, as it is not important in the light of the content" (68), the visionary Christine still plays a large role in Ebner's text. Her visions are presented as interactive experiences between Christine and the community. Reminiscent of Mechthild von Hackeborn's story, Hindsley tells us that in one of the visions, Christine "goes into mystical ecstasy on the vigil of Easter during the Mass" and, after having an extensive vision, is instructed to share a drink with her fellow

sisters (Hindsley 79-80). Hindsley continues, “Christina as visionary then takes on the role of giving the gifts already granted symbolically to the nuns in heaven on earth through the medium of some beverage” and thus she “completes the action begun in the Father” (Hindsley 80). So what is given to Mary in *The Revelations*, the first-person descriptions of mystical responses to God, is once again given to the visionary herself in Ebner’s writing.

Immediate differences become apparent when looking at *The Revelations* next to the writing of the other Engelthal writer, Adelheid Langmann, because Langmann’s text weaves in large amount of biographical information. Hindsley writes that Langmann’s text begins with the sign of the cross (which “indicates three interpretive possibilities: *Revelations* as public document, prayer, or sermon” (59)) and “records the remarkable events of temptation and grace that lead her to rise to her special status as beloved of God” (59). The text works to show how Langmann overcomes pressures (such as her family’s not wanting her to become a nun) and rises to the level of a prominent and known spiritual woman and beloved bride of Christ (Hindsley 59-60, Garber 143). Rebecca Garber writes this loose chronology present in the text “allows Langmann to inscribe Adelheid’s life and actions into the representations of both the ‘wise child’ from the saints’ lives, and, later, into an increasing pattern of intimacy with the Godhead” (128). Garber continues, “Within her own text, Langmann represents Adelheid as both the initiating, desirous woman requesting the presence of Christ, and as the passive object of God’s love” and gives only Mechthild von

Magdeburg as another example of a woman putting her textual self into both such roles (129). While loosely, Elizabeth can both be seen to be desirous of Christ's presence (weeping that he has not visited her "as he was wonte to doo" (57)) and the passive receptacle of His love (Christ's tells her "O my dere doughter, trouble the not, ne be not sory for mynde off thy synnes, forwhy all thy synnes ben forgyuen the" (95)), again, the degree to which these two women do so and the prominence of Adelheid's presence in comparison to Elizabeth distinguishes the two texts considerably. Moreover, though each text involves a progression, Langmann's text emphasizes this progression as one of its visionary figure gaining credibility in the larger community, while *The Revelations* present Elizabeth's advancement as largely private. Garber makes the point that this "appearance of outsiders seeking advice within personal revelatory texts stands in marked contrast to the vision cycles and the [S]ister-books, in which the external world receives little notice" (150). Though she would perhaps move *The Revelations*, differing so much from Langmann's text, into this category of vision-cycles, I see the differences also supporting *The Revelations* position as a tool and conduit for prayer. That is, the exclusion of the outside world and the downplaying of the visionary, as we see in *The Revelations*, also allows the audience to step into the text and, to a greater extent than these other writings, become involved during the reading process, imagining themselves in the place of visionary.

In her discussion of the Sister-Books, Lewis argues that they form their own genre (48-57). After surveying the similarities between the Sister-Books and other

texts in the genres of mysticism, historiography, and hagiography, she asserts the

Sister-Books create a kind of composite genre. She writes:

The Sister-Books, then, may be understood as a body of literature whose language is deliberately simple, whose structure follows the *Vitae fratrum*, and whose narrative, by using legendary patterns, conveys spiritual teaching, and, above all, who every page celebrates the saintliness of sisters and of women's communities (56-7).

The Revelations seem to occupy a similar, composite position, then—containing stylistic elements from similar genres and combining them together to accomplish a larger devotional purpose.

Chapter Four: How Reading *The Revelations*'s Changed in England

Shortly after their composition, an extensive excerpt from *The Revelations*—Mary as a young woman in the temple—was appropriated and inserted into the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Mediationes Vitae Christi* (McNamer 14), itself an overtly devotional text. This appropriation hints at a similar perception of function between the two texts, further supporting the text's devotional use at an early stage. Yet, whatever the case, by the time the text reached England in the fifteenth-century, with the country's huge production and consumption of devotional works, the text was most certainly being read for its devotional capacities by men and women, lay and religious alike. How might *The Revelations* devotional reading have changed from one context and audience to another? In my final chapter, I will look at two groups from *The Revelations*'s fifteenth-century English audience: religious women and laywomen. By narrowing myself down to these readers, I hope to examine some of the subtle shifts that must have occurred when the text was read in the new context.

The English Audience: Sisters and Laywomen

The Revelations certainly appear to have been read by women religious in England. Of one of the Middle English texts, (MS Hh.i.11), McNamer writes, "The opening words of the sermon on [folio] 1288, which refer to the Virgin as *owre gloriows moder, vowe & patronesse*, seem to indicate that the manuscript belonged to a nunnery dedicated to the Blessed Virgin" (26). Trying to pinpoint exactly which group of religious women, however, proves a little more difficult. Both McNamer and

Barratt acknowledge that Hh.i.11 “probably belonged to a community of East Anglian nuns, possibly to the Franciscans of Bruisyard, Suffolk” (“Continental” 248). And McNamer adds:

This is plausible not only because the convent at Bruisyard was dedicated to the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, but because a copy of the Revelations is likely to have held particular appeal for Franciscans: nearly every extant copy of the Revelations is found in a manuscript of Franciscan origin [...] (26).

Besides the Franciscans, other religious groups possibly connect to *The Revelations* in England are the Carthusians and the Bridgettines. Speaking about the Cambridge, Magdalene College MS F.4.14 manuscript, in which a Latin version of *The Revelations* is found, McNamer states, “The inclusion of the life of the Carthusian saint Anthelm of Belley may indicate that the manuscript is of Carthusian origin” (30). Of Mechthild von Hackeborn’s revelations, which certainly must have circled in a similar fashion to *The Revelations*, Voaden writes:

[T]he revelations of Mechthild of Hackeborn were frequently found in compilations and libraries along with the works of the more widely known Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Indeed she seems to have traveled on their coattails, entering England through the auspices of the Carthusians and their association with Syon (Voaden “The Company” 68).

Voaden’s reference to Syon Abbey in England may also be important, as Julia Boffey mentions in “Women authors and women’s literacy in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England,” the Bridgettine nuns of Syon Abbey were instrumental in bringing devotional texts to a female audience both inside and outside the convent walls (161). The “extremely pious, wealthy, and well-connected” Syon appears to have encouraged

the publication and exchange of many devotional texts (Barratt “Continental” 250). For example, Ian Johnson writes of the *Speculum Devotorum*, that it was compiled by an “unknown monk of Sheen,” possibly for the benefit of a sister at Syon Abbey (178). Rebecca Krug writes of a 1494 de Worde copy of *The Scale of Perfection* that a Carthusian gave to Joan Sewell of Syon Abbey (155). Krug also speaks of some sixty 1525 de Worde copies of *Ymage of Love* by John Ryckes that were bought by Syon Abbey (202). In fact, the partnership between de Worde and Syon was very strong. By the mid-sixteenth century, de Worde dominated “the market in devotional printing, and Syon was one of his best customers” (Krug 202-3). Of course, *The Revelations* themselves were printed by de Worde making an association with the Bridgettines of Syon not entirely out of the question. This connection is further supported by the linguistic patterns of *The Revelations*’s de Worde prints, which might be localized to East Anglia and the area around London (McNamer 36-37). Based on these connections then, as well as similar connections with other continental and/or devotional texts, we can say with a certain amount of certainty that at least some of *The Revelations*’s audience in England consisted of sisters.

Yet, women religious were not the only females reading the text. Margery Kempe (d. 1440?), a bourgeois English wife and mother also in East Anglia, justifies her uncontrollable tears with Elizabeth of Hungary’s name (Staley 113)—a move that, in emphasizing tears, shows Kempe had been in contact not with a vita of the actual saint from Hungary but with *The Revelations* of Elizabeth of Töss. Felicity Riddy, in

an essay that studies the book-giving patterns of England during this time, argues convincingly that “it seems clear that the literary culture of nuns in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and that of devout gentlewomen not only overlapped but were more or less indistinguishable” (110). That *The Revelations* were printed along with *The Lyf of Saint Katherin* if Senis twice by de Worde—once around the year 1493 and then again around 1500—also indicates a level of popularity outside religious communities (McNamer 40).

Similarities Between the Contexts:

According to Anne Bartlett, in her book *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature*, a devotional text must acknowledge and fit with the climate in which it is being read. Of medieval devotional texts, she writes:

[D]evotional texts for women reflect, transmit, and perpetuate ideologies already in circulation: codes of gender, conduct, and class, along with their religious instruction. To achieve their goals, prescriptive discourse must coincide with a reader’s previously internalized structure of beliefs, her education in literary and social conventions, and her position in a political system (19).

There must have been some similarities between Töss and England for *The Revelations* to be read devotionally in both. Indeed, Bartlett’s assertion appears to make it impossible to be otherwise. The devotional text of *The Revelations* must have resonated with beliefs already in practice in England or else contributed to the forming

of this environment in such a way early on that by the late-fifteenth century its ideas were completely at home in England.

One such affinity between contexts is affective or emotional piety, a piety chiefly adopted by and directed towards women throughout the medieval period, both on the continent and in England. Affective piety emphasized the imaginative and concentrated on the bodily, human aspects of Christ's birth and death. In this religious practice, the participant sensually imagined herself in various scenes from Scripture or key points in the lives of Mary or Christ. Describing this piety as, in one sense, "a condescending instrument of the clerical elite to deflect the religious concentration of the laity from areas of the faith in which their intervention was not welcome," Alcuin Blamires states that it "dwells on the bodily dimension of Christ's life" and because of this it "was represented as a type of elementary practice suitable for those – including de facto most women since they were barred from universities – whose educational limitations disqualified them from more sophisticated forms of contemplation" (152). Whether imagining herself comforting Mary after Christ's death, as did Margery Kempe (Staley 142), or vividly placing herself in the role of Christ's bride, as did Adelheid Langmann (Garber 127-58), women both on the continent and in England practiced affective piety as a means to gain access to the divine. This practice was not only connected to women or those practicing affective piety, however. Ross notes, "The practice of active remembering characterizes medieval spirituality" (55). Such active remembering sought to "arouse the mediator's affections, to bring the message

of Scripture into the present” (Ross 55). *The Revelations*, conducive to and eliciting imaginative devotion, appeal to this strain of affective piety that crossed through both the Töss and the English contexts.

Additionally, these two groups of female readers in England seem also to have been privileged like the sisters of Töss. As mentioned earlier, Riddy unites the gentlewomen readers in England like Margery Kempe with sisterly readers in England into one undistinguishable reading group (110). Krug notes that the wealthy Syon Abbey took women who were eighteen and older, so these Syon sisters “had already had 18 years in which they had learned what the relationship between highborn women and written texts was, and this experience too influenced literate practice at the convent” (188). Being from society’s upper ranks was found in the sisters at Töss, as well. For example, Winston-Allen demonstrates how much social rank played a role within the walls of the Dominican cloisters. She notes, “Records at the Dominican cloister of Kirchberg in Wurttemberg, where formerly only daughters of noble families had been accepted, show that by the latter half of the fourteenth century, the majority of inhabitants were affluent non-nobles” and that it was not until the year 1354, that “a commoner was for the first time named prioress there” (36). So, like the practice of affective piety, a level of social standing in society, a privileged social standing, seems to have been another shared characteristic between the readers in Töss and England.

A third similarity is that devotional texts can be seen to function in corresponding ways between each context: continually stressing the interaction

between text and reader, as is the case for both *The Revelations* and the Töss Sister-Book. Speaking of the late-medieval Bridgettine text *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, Krug remarks that it assumes “devotional reading involves a relationship between the reader, God, and the book itself” (174). Jennifer Summit, in “Women and Authorship,” also argues for the involvement demanded by devotional texts. She states, “Devotional reading was an active process that enlisted the reader as the co-creator of meaning” (104). And Newman places the texts “on the borderline between theory and practice,” both putting forth ideas of a specific kind of holiness and allowing this holiness to be expressed through the reading process (14). Finally, Johnson demonstrates the extent of this involvement between text and reader, pointing out that in some cases, the completion of the text only occurred with being read (as well as being believed and followed).¹⁷ Of the late-medieval, devotional *The Orchard of Syon*, Johnson writes “Although the compiler’s labour is, in one sense, complete once the book is in the hands of his readers, he nevertheless presents himself as continuing to labour in the production of the text during its realization in the process of reading” (184). Thus, like *The Revelations* in Töss, devotional texts demanded a particular kind of involvement from their readers for the sake of their reader’s spiritual betterment. Though speaking of general medieval reading theories, Bartlett states, “They contend that audiences became progressively ‘reformed,’ both physically (through changed behavior) and inwardly (through mental, emotional, and spiritual alterations) as a result of their internalization of written material” (17). This contention becomes all the more strong

and apparent in devotional texts. Participative reading of devotional texts was supposed to spiritually aid the reader, improving her relationship with God.

Yet, despite these high aims of devotional texts in both contexts, as products of a human, literary culture, they were not devoid of secular impulses, desires, and reactions. For example, Bartlett draws attention to the other streams of thought—what she calls “counterdiscourses”—running through devotional texts: “courtly romance, conduct manuals, and love lyrics” or monastic spiritual epistles (3-4). Looking directly at *The Revelations*, we can identify the familiar lines of a feudal relationship between Mary and Elizabeth, with Elizabeth kneeling before her lord and even signing a charter (McNamer 104, 61). Additionally, there are places where *The Revelations* might cross over to the position of a conduct manual; for example, Mary’s seven askings—speaking on matters like grace, meekness, serving the Virgin, and “kepe[ing] all the byddyngis of the bisshoppes and the ordeynaunce of the temple” (67)—and her seven blessings—for wisdom, counsel, strength, and pity—give an outline for good female religious conduct.¹⁸ Though *The Revelations* and other English devotional texts prioritized their readers’ spiritual betterment, these texts were not devoid of other, more secular discourses as well.

Subtle Shifts in Reading

Despite the generalities we can make about the two contexts—that affective piety practices can be seen in both places and that devotional texts read in both places demanded a level of involvement from their readers—the reading of *The Revelations*

seems to have slightly shifted from one context to another. While the text would still have created for its English readers prayer-like movements through segment patterns and repetition, while it would still have invited readers into the position of being a direct recipient of Mary's words, and while it still would have led readers towards a culminating vision of Christ's bodily act of love and mercy, *The Revelations's* devotional reading in England seems likely to have shifted to a small degree. A female reader in England, I would suggest, would have felt an increased presence of Elizabeth and an increased presence of the text.

Looking at Elizabeth's presence, one of the first, very obvious, changes emerges in the misattribution of the text to Saint Elizabeth—a misattribution, which would have clouded the English marketing, disseminating, and reading of the text. That readers in England were approaching the text as *The Revelations of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary* greatly alters their perceptions of the Elizabeth character. A divinely sanctioned authority is given to a hagiographic text. Johnson speaks of the power of the title "saint," writing, "Just as it was appropriate to treat a holy woman's vision as authoritative by attaching it to a named saint, so it was appropriate to translate a literary work by a named saint as if it were one of authority" (183). What is more, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, in her essay "Saints' Lives and the Female reader," shows how influential writings about female saints were for women—or at least, how influential these writings worked to be. Wogan-Browne remarks that "on the evidence of explicit medieval recommendations of particular saints, of the proportions of male

and female lives in manuscript collections for known audiences and from some internal indications in the lives themselves, female saints tend to be perceived as particularly relevant models for female audiences” (314). Thus, an English female reader approached *The Revelations* as authoritative—indeed, perhaps only approached the text at all—because of Elizabeth’s sainthood. Though the text makes its own authoritative claim at the end—

All thyse thinges before sayde, Saynt Elysabeth aboute the endynge of her lyff, the whiche was in the yere of Our Lorde a MCCXXXI, affermyd that she hadde seyn and herde, as it is aboue wryton. *And she sayde that she hadde so grete certaynte off theym all that she wold rather suffer deth thenne to doubte ony lytyll art of theim that they were not trewe* (101, my emphasis)—

the term “Saynt” solidifies Elizabeth’s and the text’s credibility. So, while in a Töss reading we can easily imagine the sister Elizabeth almost disappearing from the text, in England this saintly figure’s presence was needed to divinely sanction each word or lesson by Mary. Though the text diminishes her role, an English reader would have to actively hold her in mind: these are the instructions on prayer that Mary gave *to Saint Elizabeth*, this is the story of her youth that Mary told *to Saint Elizabeth*, this is the way Christ appeared *to Saint Elizabeth*. Without the idea that this Elizabeth is “one of our own” which we can project on the Töss audience, the English readers must retain Elizabeth’s presence as a mediator. Thus, though the misattribution might have occurred relatively quickly after *The Revelations*’s composition (McNamer 9), the farther the text moved from the Töss context, the more its authority depended on that

saintly misnomer; because of this, readers could not allow Elizabeth's presence to slide from the text.¹⁹

We can qualify Elizabeth's presence in an English reading further, however. With the English misattribution to Saint Elizabeth, the daughter of King Andreas II of Hungary, there is also an immediate conveyance of royalty and social privilege. Elizabeth does not just lend holy authority to the text but she, as a person of rank in society, lends a secular authority and privilege to the text as well. English readers were not only reading of a saint, but a princess-saint. Johnson asserts that "just as it was important that Orfeo was a king, and Elizabeth of Hungary royal, so also is Bridget crowned Queen of Sweden" (182). Though probably added in a later century, the power attributed to this royal biography is exemplified in the handwritten note added to a first page of a de Worde print. In summarizing the text, the owner and reader of this copy of *The Revelations* writes, "*This holy princess* lived in the yere of our redemption, 1220 [and] shee died the 19th of November, 1231, whom Gregory the nyynth Pope canonized for a glorious sayncte" (McNamer 53, my emphasis). Below the printed words "Here bygynnen the reuelacios of Saynt Elysabeth the kynges doughter of hungarye," this same reader appears to have added, "called Andreas, of Queene Gertrude his wife" (McNamer 53). Once again, an English reader could not even slightly erase this Elizabeth from the text—her presence was needed and felt more because of its saintly, royal garb.

Furthermore, with this increased presence of a privileged heroine, we can hypothesize a sense of privilege seeping into the text's devotional aims. If the text does attempt to bring about in its readers, regardless of context, a closer relationship with Christ, any reader approaching the text with a sense of Elizabeth's royalty would see Elizabeth's responses and Mary's instructions in this royal light: these are the actions of nobility. The spiritual progression put forth and sought by the text vaguely becomes equated with Elizabeth's social prestige. By reading and imitating the prayer practices of *The Revelations*, the reader would be imitating a kind of religious expression of the privileged.

In fairness, we must acknowledge that this kind of reading might not be entirely new to *The Revelations* in England. Lewis and others point out that Töss was spiritually and economically quite comfortable (Lewis 23) and Riehle draws our attention to Elizabeth's special place in the convent, saying "The book of the Sisters of Toess also contains a vita of Elizabeth, *who appears to have been the pride of the nunnery*" (31, my emphasis). Her very singling out, having both a *vita* and a set of revelations, could easily stem from her own royal status. After all, the Töss Sister-Book gives accounts of sisters experiencing much more miraculous events.²⁰ However, to counter such an assertion, Elizabeth of Töss does appear to have been known for her piety. Barratt writes of the vita of Elizabeth:

From this we learn that Sister Elizabeth was very humble and gentle; she loved to confess frequently even when bedridden as she so often was; she wept abundantly while praying, especially on Good Friday; she had a great devotion to

the Virgin, especially to her Annunciation, which she manifested by frequent repetitions of the Ave. (She recited one thousand Aves on every feast of Our Lady and would sometimes recite seven thousand in honour of the number of hours that Jesus had spent in the Virgin's womb). She composed prayers in German, was a visionary who experienced ecstatic trances, levitated, and performed minor miracles ("The Revelations" 8).

The vita of Elizabeth, then, does seem to support Elizabeth's singling out for pious reasons. That said, *The Revelations's* reading in England must have amplified this royal role of Elizabeth's to give authority to the text. A reader's imagining the virtual dimension of the text, her anticipating and retrospecting, could not exclude this sense of the visionary's privilege, and by doing so, simultaneously tinged the devotion within with connotations of secular, social advancement.

But the Elizabeth's is not the only presence more apparent in an English reading. The textual element of *The Revelations*, its presence as a physical book that one reads also increases. First of all, as Voaden shows through Mechthild von Hackeborn's circulation ("The Company" 51-69), *The Revelations* were circling with other, already celebrated foreign women writers. It was one among many. This position as a text amidst a larger category of books from the continent brought *The Revelations* an authority through association. This position in a wider current of continental texts, I would argue, emphasized its bookishness. An English reader, during this time when books were being increasingly printed, owned, and exchanged,²¹ would have sensed the textually quality of *The Revelations* in ways the Töss sisters would not have—especially if they were hearing *The Revelations* orally in the

workroom or refectory. Instead of being simply a devotional tool then, *The Revelations* were a devotional textual tool.

Secondly, though still connected to the first point, the images of reading within *The Revelations* must have taken on an added importance for English readers and book owners. For example, Mary's studying and reading Isaiah before the Annunciation, a common medieval depiction (McNamer 111), must have increasingly signified book ownership—not only reinforcing reading and studying, but also reinforcing the new availability of books and the sense that they are printed, portable, owned objects. In this context, Elizabeth and Mary's verbal interactions could be seen to parallel and resemble female book exchanging. Mary Erler writes that reading was situated “within a network of reciprocity,” acquiring the book and sharing it with others was in and of itself “meritorious” (Erler 27). *The Revelations*, in this context, can be seen to support such a textual sharing both between Mary and Elizabeth and between the text and the reader. Though a textual aspect to *The Revelations* of course must have been sensed in Töss, (after all, learning was prized), the absence of this growing book market and book culture would have allowed Töss readers, by comparison, to minimize the physical textual quality, focusing more on narration or story. By subtle contrast, I would suggest that an English reader could not quite escape a textual association; she was always reading a book and that fact brought a new level of presence to the text.

Additionally, I would suggest that *The Revelations* sometimes might have allowed women in England to live out a female piety not otherwise available or

accepted. Margery Kempe's frequent confrontations demonstrate how a woman who attempted to physically live like Elizabeth was not always welcomed. For example, during some of her travels, Kempe tells us that Margery's company "were most displeased because she wept so much and spoke always of the love and goodness of our Lord, as well at the table as in other places" (Staley 45). So, reading the text and imagining herself into it allowed an English reader to religiously express herself in ways perhaps not always encouraged in the real world around her. Krug gives insights into reading at Syon that also could support this kind of reading for *The Revelations*. Krug argues that the Syon sisters' approach to their individual books changed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (153-206). She states, "Increasingly, the nuns' private reading at Syon Abbey involved an intense experience of identification with books as both material and spiritual objects" (157). One of the possible reasons Krug gives behind this movement towards identification is a demand made on the sisters to be representatives of spiritual beliefs for the world outside the cloister (200-2). They had agreed to live a particular kind of life, and to achieve the means to live that life, they and their leaders had to work "very hard to maintain Syon's associations with austere piety and intense, devotional spirituality for the secular public" (Krug 200-1). Their outward concerns and consciousness could take forms that "conflicted with the ascetic, contemplative goals of the order" (Krug 202). Keeping Krug's in mind, we can see that reading *The Revelations* might have sometimes aided sisters in living out a desired religious life. Like stepping into the orchard in *The Orchard of Syon*, the sister steps

into the private room of Elizabeth and Mary in *The Revelations* and a context of continental piety. So, *The Revelations* were still a textual aid for experiencing the divine, but they were now perhaps more of a textual aid that must first channel a piety of another time and place to have that divine experience. Though, like their Töss partners, these English sisters and laywomen must have been able to easily imagine themselves into the text, as well as find strong parallels between their own contemplations and the contemplations of Elizabeth and Mary, they had added layers of hagiography, foreignness, and royalty to reach through. The sense that *The Revelations* was a book, one that spoke of events and people existing outside their lived experience, permeated their reading.

Thus, in England, *The Revelations* seem to not just seek devotion, but a kind of devotion mediated through a textual, bookish representation of female holiness from another time and another place. In this new context the text was not just a text to read for spiritual guidance, but a text that channeled a certain kind of religious experience—a religious experience that was saintly and royal and somewhat distant, and a religious experience that might have been more difficult to achieve otherwise. This, and its existing amidst this climate of exchanging, printing, and owning books from the continent or books of devotion, must have increased the textual presence of *The Revelations* for its English readers.

Challenging Traditional Authority

Finally, we must acknowledge the potential to challenge traditional male Church authority present in an English reading of *The Revelations*. *The Revelations*, when not read within cloistered and – theoretically – controlled walls, certainly opens up opportunities that could have worried traditional Church leaders. In the first segment, as soon as Elizabeth “stylye dysposed her to goo to somme spyrytuelle brother for to haue counseylle theroff,” Mary appears to her. The suddenness of this appearance, even within the same sentence as the thought of seeking brotherly spiritual advice, feels like an intervention by Mary. A few sentences later, Mary’s intervention becomes undeniably clear; she candidly tells her new disciple, “Ther is noo brother in the worlde that may better enforme the of thy spouse than I maye” (57). This beginning, coupled with a lack of male authority throughout the text, must have been troubling for some English readers. Though Mary’s asking do include a nod towards the bishops and Church (67), this reference seems stilted, almost automatic next to the impassioned: “Ther is *noo brother in the worlde* that may better enforme the of thy spouse *than I maye*” (57, my emphasis). In the hands of someone of someone not under Church watch, perhaps a female, we can imagine how threatening these words might be to authority figures. Newman writes of devotional writing:

Intentional visions had posed little threat so long as they remained safely cloistered, understood in the context of monastic piety rather than prophecy. But once laymen and women had begun to make prophetic claims on the basis of cultivated visions, trouble was bound to ensue (6).

In fact, Karen Winstead speaks of reading as “a charged issue in fifteenth-century England” (152), especially in regards to lay reading and Lollardy (121). A laywoman, reading *The Revelations* in such a context, must certainly have been sensitive to such issues. Her act of reading the text would have been loaded with a potential for subversion.²²

Conclusion

The Revelations of Elizabeth of Hungary appear to have functioned as a devotional tool in multiple contexts. Reenacting the movements of prayer and leading its readers towards a spiritually advanced state—indeed, allowing its readers to experience a vision of Christ—*The Revelations* can be seen to mirror, model, instruct, and bring about a specific kind of devotion practiced in the Töss convent and other convents like it, as well as a specific set of expectations and life goals. By doing so in a tight, compact, deliberate fashion, *The Revelations* distinguish themselves from other sisterly writing of the time period on the Continent—or at least from those with which it is so often categorized. When moved into England, the reading of *The Revelations* by women, sisters and laywomen, must have shifted in its new context, though exactly how remains more elusive. As I have suggested, I see these English readers emphasizing the presences of Elizabeth and the text more than their Töss counterparts did. The need for signs of authority given by titles like “saint” or “princess” and the growing prevalence of books as both authoritative and a means to express and encapsulate a kind of religious piety increased these two presences in an English reading of the text. Where a Töss reader might easily have listened to *The Revelations* and inserted herself and her own experiences, an English reader would have—even while doing the exact same thing—also had to acknowledge a certain distance from the figure of Elizabeth and relegate a certain amount of the espoused devotion to the world of the text only.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of the textual history of *The Revelations*, see McNamer, 17-20.

² We must identify two authors for *The Revelations*: the author of the visions and the author of the text. McNamer states that although “[t]here is no doubt that the visions and dialogues related in the text originated with Elizabeth herself; indeed, the concluding lines of the text are quite insistent on establishing her ‘authority’ [...] The written form of the text, however, appears to have been produced by someone other than Elizabeth soon after her death, possibly by one of Elizabeth’s fellow nuns at Töss” (15).

³ For my purposes it matters little how many authors were involved in *The Revelations*’s composition process—one or many. However, the text’s deliberate structure and consistent patterns make it likely that is the work of a single author.

⁴ I should acknowledge at this point that my reading is obviously challenged by the distance between the Middle English versions of the text from the fifteenth-century to which I have access and the original version in Töss in the fourteenth-century. The layers of translation, time, and likely mutation separating one from the next are impossible to ignore or downplay. That said, given my own inaccessibility to the Latin versions and the present lack of any more original document, I will proceed as best I can—acknowledging the limits of my hypotheses even as I begin to state them.

⁵ Though men most likely would have read the text as well, both on the continent and in England, I have narrowed my focus to women readers for the sake of consistency.

⁶ We could say the same about the Töss Sister-Book, composed around 1340.

⁷ The term “sisterly writing” refers to any and all writing emerging out of the convents during this period: the Sister-Books, personal revelations, vision-cycles, prayers, letters, and mystical accounts. The term “sisterly” itself refers to anything or anyone connected to a convent and following the values, practices, expectations, and goals therein.

⁸ The “Bride of Christ” metaphor is present throughout much of the sisterly writing of the period: for example, in the works of Adelheid Langmann and Gertrude von Helfta (d. 1302). In *The Revelations* the image is evoked through the term *sponsa Christi*, which is applied to Elizabeth, and through Mary’s assertion that “Ther is noo brother in the worlde that may better enforme the of thy spouse than I maye” (McNamer 13, 57).

⁹Hindsley gives an example of the vow made by each sister: “I, _____, make profession and promise obedience to God, to the Blessed Mary, and to the Blessed Dominic, and to you, _____, Prioress, in the place of _____, Master of the Order of Friars Preachers, according to the rule of Blessed Augustine and the Constitutions of the Sisters whose care is committed to the Order of Preachers that I will be obedient to you and to my other Prioresses until death” (12).

¹⁰ Though the works Hamburger examines stem from a later century, he repeatedly establishes connections with the women, writing, and practices circling amongst the Dominican convents in earlier periods—making a convincing case for the duration of these ideas and practices.

¹¹ All quotations from *The Revelations* are from McNamer’s translation of the Wynkyn de Worde print.

¹² Caroline Walker Bynum speaks, in her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, of the role of physicality in medieval women’s spirituality.

¹³ The text, however, does not seem to be calling for martyrdom. Rather, it seems to be encouraging a physical worship. The physical worshipping is given meaning through a connection to this larger sacrifice. For a look at reading or misreading saints’ lives in England, see Catherine Sanok’s *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England* and Karen A. Winstead’s *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*.

¹⁴ Lewis points out that audition and locution were also “a criterion in all saints’ lives,” implying a crossover between the Sister-Books and hagiography—one of many (Lewis 76). For discussions on these as stages of visionary experiences, see Frank Tobin’s “Medieval Thought on Visions and Its Resonance in Mechthild von Magdeburg’s Flowing Light of the Godhead.”

¹⁵ In this last description we might see some cross over with *The Revelation*’s numerical patterns with Mary’s seven askings and blessings. This style might speak to larger, mnemonic practices used in the late-medieval period for praying and mediation. Their list-like quality would probably have helped readers to remember Mary’s words later on, as they frequently repeat themselves. For example, in segment four, we are presented with Mary giving three commandments to love God, love your neighbor as yourself, and love “thy frende,” humans and good angels, and hate “thyn enemye,” the

devil (63). A few moments later, Mary tells Elizabeth of the seven askings she made as a young girl in the temple. The first three of these repeat the three commandments already given (65). Moreover, in a similar format within segment five, Mary speaks of the seven blessings she asks for from God (77).

¹⁶ Following scholarly practice, when referring to the visionary presented in the text, I use the first names of Christine or Adelheid. To speak about the real person who experienced the visions and, either through dictation or writing, played a role in composing the revelatory accounts, I use the last names of Ebner or Langmann.

¹⁷ This idea connects to Lewis's assertions that the Sister-Books considered themselves complete only when the sisters reading it lived by the example of their sisterly predecessors (42).

¹⁹ That both of de Worde's prints printed *The Revelations* with the *Life of Saint Catherine of Siena* also sheds light on the importance of Elizabeth's saintly title in England. It probably perpetuated the categorizing of *The Revelations* as hagiographic, both in the Late Medieval Period and in scholarship today.

²⁰ For examples of such, see the discussion of the Töss Sister-Book in Chapter Three, page 32.

²¹ For a closer look at the reading of women in England around the time of *The Revelations* printing, see Mary C. Erler's *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England*. Erler writes, "So many forms of book transmission suggest that systemized book exchange was by the mid-fifteenth century a widespread practice, established through mechanisms which were becoming more and more common – or at least more and more visible to us (28).

²² This is not to imply that such issues were not present for women on the continent; they were. Jo Ann McNamera, in her "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy," highlights the concerns Church authorities and even the Dominican Order had over controlling a female piety some saw as threatening.

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